



Head Start and Teacher Qualifications

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Setting the Stage

The federal Head Start program has long served as a model of quality in the early care and education community. Since its inception in 1965, its comprehensive approach to providing services to children and families has ensured that economically disadvantaged children and families receive high quality education, health, nutrition and social services. The federal government has encouraged and even sponsored decades of research evaluating Head Start's effectiveness. As a result, research on Head Start provides substantial evidence that points to the program's educational (Abbot-Shim et al., 2003; Garces et al., 2002; Meier, 2003), social (Ludwig, & Miller, 2006, Fight Crime: Invest In Kids, 2004)), health (Parker et al., 1987; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2005; Ludwig & Miller, 2006; Hale et al., 1990; Currie & Thomas, 1995) and economic (Meier, 2003, Fight Crime: Invest In Kids, 2004) benefits to economically at risk children, their families, and society as a whole.

Head Start was last reauthorized in 1998. As part of the reauthorization process, Congress mandated that fifty percent of all Head Start teachers attain associates (A.A.) degrees in early childhood education or a related field with experience teaching preschool children by 2003. The act went on to further specify that all Head Start teachers possess, at minimum, a Child Development Associate (CDA) credential or state awarded certificate for preschool teachers that meets or exceeds the requirements for the CDA credential¹. These mandates are indicative of a general trend in the United States to increase quality in programs for young children by raising teacher credentials.

The Head Start community demonstrated its commitment to quality services by exceeding these expectations. According to 2003 data, 27% of Head Start teachers nation wide held a CDA, 27 % had an A.A., 27% had a B.A and 4% had a graduate degree in early childhood education or a related field. Among the 15% of teachers without any credentials or degrees, 58% were pursuing a 2 or 4 year degree and 18% were pursuing a CDA credential or its equivalent (Hart & Shumacher, 2005).

¹The CDA is granted by the Council for Professional Recognition and requires teachers to (1) possess at least a high school diploma or equivalent; (2) obtain at minimum, 480 clock hours of appropriate experience in an early childhood education setting and 120 clock hours of specific, formal early childhood education; (3) document competency through formal observation of their teaching, satisfactory confidential parent evaluations, and completion of a professional resource file; and (5) obtain passing scores on CDA written and oral examinations. Teachers must renew these credentials every 5 years by demonstrating satisfactory, on-going professional development and employment in an appropriate early childhood education setting.



According to 2004-2005 PIR data, 9 % of Pennsylvania Head Start teachers held a CDA, 20 % held an AA, 53% held a BA, and 10% held a graduate degree in early childhood education or a related field.

Current Head Start reauthorization was scheduled for 2003. Though the process has stalled, both bills in the house and senate possess provisions to increase the number of Head Start teachers with bachelor's degrees. It appears highly likely that language that increases current minimum standards for teacher qualifications, and proscribes a time line for programs to comply with these standards, will appear in the final regulations. There is also the distinct possibility that future federal regulations will include language requiring programs to adhere to individual state standards for pre-k teacher qualifications. Thus, federal and state legislation are poised to further increase the minimum qualifications for Head Start teachers.

Though the Congress' intent to improve quality through increasing the required number of Head Start teachers with BAs is noble, numerous questions exist concerning the premise of this approach and the unforeseen consequences that this mandate may produce. This paper will outline two major areas of concern. First, the existing research informing this proposed legislation is not as definitive as people have been led to believe. Second, the feasibility and challenges this legislation would create are substantial. Specifically, questions about the multiple barriers to individual staff in attaining a four year degree, barriers to Head Start programs as they support staff en route to a four year degree, and limitations of the country's teacher preparation programs to offer necessary coursework and supports to both traditional and non-traditional students as they seek to advance their qualifications. Recommendations regarding future legislation related to Head Start teacher qualifications will be offered at the end of the paper.

Research on Staff Qualifications and Quality

As research confirms the important role of early experiences in children's development and later school success, the focus on quality early childhood programs, and their characteristics has increased. The passage of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 and its companion early childhood presidential initiative, *Good Start, Grow Smart* has further elevated the issue. As states are being held accountable for showing children's progress under NCLB, they are looking ever more to the early childhood community to ensure that children enter the public school system ready to learn. Furthermore, during budget constrictions, taxpayers and policy makers alike are seeking evidence that early childhood programs, especially programs that offer services to economically at risk children, represent sound investments. All of these issues have converged to create increased scrutiny of early childhood education programs and the characteristics that are associated with positive outcomes for children. Teacher qualifications have emerged from the literature as one of many factors that contribute to quality early childhood environments (Martinez-Beck & Zaslow, 2006).



Traditionally, early childhood educators in the United States have possessed a wide variety of qualifications. Recent research confirms this diversity in the range of degrees attained (high school diploma or equivalency through graduate degrees), the concentration of coursework studied (no specialized coursework through early childhood education or a related field), and the amount of experience working with young children (Benson McMullen, & Alat, 2002). Concurrent with this variety in ECE teacher background, are the extensive dissimilarities among states regarding minimal qualifications for teachers working in early childhood settings (Lobman, Ryan, & McLaughlin, 2005). This variation among states is further compounded by variability in teacher qualifications among different types of ECE programs within the *same* state (Ackerman, 2005; Gilliam & Marchesseault, 2005). Thus, early childhood educators in the United States are a highly, heterogeneous group; a characteristic that makes them difficult to study.

A substantial literature exists suggesting that highly qualified teachers are better equipped to provide developmentally appropriate experiences for children (Arnett, 1989; Berk, 1985; Whitebook et. al., 1990; Dunn, 1993; NICHD, 2002; Barnett, 2003). More recent work, however, has identified “a series of problems and gaps in the understanding of early childhood professional development,” (Martinez-Beck & Zaslow, 2006 pp. 1). These gaps can be attributed to methodological problems in the research. Most notable are issues related to sampling, confounding training with education, how researchers collect and analyze teacher background data, and the use of teacher education level as a proxy for quality (Whitebook, 2003; Matinez-Beck & Zaslow, 2006; Fuller, 2006; Pianta, 2006).

In his analysis Bruce Fuller identifies sampling issues as a limitation of the body of research typically cited to support four year degrees. Sample sizes are typically small, causing researchers to lump teachers with AA degrees in with teachers who have a CDA or “some college” (Fuller, et. al., 2006; Martinez-Beck & Zaslow, 2006). Studies that use this approach are then unable to ascertain the behavior of teachers with AA degrees separate from those with less formal, early childhood education.

Whitebook, 2003 notes the separate, but related issue, that training and education have typically been viewed as continuous variables. The design of these studies prevents them from directly comparing teachers with a two year degree in ECE to those with four year degrees. Although the resulting analysis suggests that more education or training is related to quality, it fails to quantify the gains achieved as teachers move from two to four-year degrees (Whitebook, 2003; Fuller et. al., 2006; Raikes et. al., 2006).

The few studies that do specifically compare classroom behavior exhibited by teachers with 2 versus 4 year degrees indicate comparable levels of quality (Fuller, 2006). Pianta notes that “Knowledge of child development and application of that knowledge in preschool settings are emphasized as much in two-year



training programs as in four-year programs, if not more.” (Pianta, 2006 pp. 5). This body of research casts doubts on the position that BA degrees provide benefits beyond those linked to two-year degrees with specific training in child development (Fuller, 2006).

In addition, formal education and other child-related training are often confounded (Whitebook, 2003). Teachers with degrees are also more likely to have participated in other child-related training experiences. Studies have failed to control for this, making it difficult to determine how much of the variance in program quality is attributable to pre-service education or degrees versus the other child related professional development that many degreed teachers have participated in. Associates degrees with specialized pre-service training and quality, program specific, in-service training have, in effect, been undervalued by the research design of most studies.

When studies have made the distinction between formal education and other professional development, they suggest that a well-designed and implemented in-service education program produces better results than pre-service degrees (Tout, Zaslow, & Berry, 2006). Other research notes that while program quality correlated with formal education in public school programs, in-service training was significantly related to quality in Head Start (Epstein, 1999). Head Start programs as a whole possess the infrastructure and resources to offer quality in-service education to staff in order to meet performance standards (see appendix A for Head Start Program Performance Standards related to staff training and professional development).

In his recent analysis of the current research on teacher qualifications, Bruce Fuller also points out that many of the studies cited to support four year degrees do not actually allow us to directly link positive outcomes for children to the training that teachers with four year degrees receive (Fuller, et. al., 2006). He notes that studies fail to control for teachers’ prior background characteristics and attitudes that themselves may lead to more positive approaches to teaching, independent of education. The failure of researchers to control for these variables prevents them from determining their impact on teacher behavior irrespective of degree status, consequently making it difficult to draw direct links between teacher education and child outcomes (Fuller et. al., 2006).

Finally, Pianta challenges the heavy reliance on teacher education level as an indicator for classroom quality (Pianta, 2006). He notes the relatively large variation in curriculum implementation and quality of teaching among credentialed teachers with BA degrees found in the state funded pre-K, kindergarten and 1st grade classrooms studied in both the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development Study of Early Child Care and Youth Development (NICHD SECCYD) and the National Center for Early Development and Learning (NCEDL) Multi State Pre-K Study. Pianta argues that “the standard measures of teacher quality



(degrees, experience) are not reliable proxies for what teachers do in the classroom,” (Pianta, 2006 pp. 5). He believes that policies that require teachers to advance in terms of degree status will not necessarily result in an increase in quality in the classroom and subsequently, child outcomes.

Thus, although the research on teacher qualifications suggest links between education level and quality, it fails to quantify the gain achieved from two to four year degrees. Substantial questions remain about the interplay between basic level of education, specialized training, in-service training and experience working with young children (Tout, Zaslow, & Berry, 2006). As a result, some researchers have called for further investigation to ascertain the exact qualifications needed to work effectively with young children (Whitebook, 2003; Fuller, 2006; Martinez-Beck & Zaslow, 2006, Pianta, 2006). Although increased formal education appears to be a reasonable *goal* for all teachers working with young children, the claim that only teachers with four year degrees can provide the quality classroom experiences necessary for children’s success is beyond what the current research indicates. Legislating B.A. degrees as the minimal qualification for Head Start teachers seems premature at this time given the unanswered questions surrounding this issue. We will now turn to a discussion of the feasibility of requiring four-year degrees for teachers in Head Start.

Feasibility

In addition to concerns about the actual quality gained from attaining a four-year degree, serious concerns about the feasibility of reaching the standard of all teachers possessing a Bachelor’s degree must be addressed. This section will discuss feasibility in terms of three areas: Barriers to individual staff, barriers to programs, and limitations within the higher education system to provide quality early childhood education curriculum.

Barriers to Individual Staff:

The current Head Start work force faces personal constraints to attaining Bachelor’s degrees in early childhood education. Research has consistently indicated that non-traditional students (a category that the current Head Start work force of AA teachers would fall into) face numerous challenges as they attempt to advance their qualifications. Non-traditional learners typically take longer to complete degree requirements (up to 5-6 years) due to delayed enrollment and part-time study with concurrent full-time employment. Because of time constraints resulting from family and work responsibilities, these students face a limited selection of courses to take each semester and often take fewer credits (Choy, 2002). In addition, the non-traditional learner often lacks the experience and educational background necessary to feel confident and succeed with college coursework. Some researchers have described this as “cultural capital” (Ackerman, 2005). These students often need specialized support and mentoring from within the higher education system.



Head Start teachers also face significant financial barriers. Average Head Start salaries restrict a student's ability to pay for coursework, and the ratio of wages to tuition at most higher education institutions makes paying for credits even more difficult. At some point, staff will need to take credits at a four-year institution where tuition is, on average, 74% higher than at two-year colleges (Center for Community College Policy, 2000). There are also additional costs to staff to pay for transportation, books and supplies, and additional child care costs. Pell grants have not kept pace with the rate of inflation, and many staff would not be eligible for aid because of part time enrollment (Hart & Shumacher, 2005).

Thus, current Head Start teaching staff would face multiple barriers when attempting to advance their degrees. Time constraints, issues with academic insecurity and financial barriers would all need to be addressed for individual staff. One place that staff may turn for additional supports are the programs that they are currently employed in, however, barriers exist at the program level that may negatively impact a program's ability to support staff as they attempt to move from CDAs or Associate's to Bachelor's degrees.

Barriers to Programs

Programs who wish to support staff as they obtain degrees face costs related to tuition, books, and supplies. In the 1998 reauthorization, Congress recognized the financial challenges of raising teacher qualifications. Requirements for increased qualifications were accompanied by increased funding to help grantees meet requirements. These funds could be used to address the costs of tuition, books, substitutes and salaries. By 2001, new quality funds reached \$356 million. Overall decreases in new funding for Head Start in subsequent years resulted in a decrease in the quality set-aside down to \$32 million by 2003 (Hart & Shumacher, 2005). Current funding levels will not allow programs to financially support staff as they obtain new credentials, and the cost of tuition, books, supplies, and pay for substitutes has not been structured into funding.

Furthermore, programs will face new struggles as they attempt to retain staff that have obtained a B.A., or hire new staff with higher qualifications. According to calculations done by the Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP), the average Head Start B.A. teacher's salary in 2003 was \$25,963. Head Start teachers with graduate degrees earned, on average \$32,629. Comparatively, the average kindergarten teacher earned \$43,530. An October 2003 study by the Government Accountability Office (GAO) found that grantees were struggling to compete for teachers with degrees in early childhood education. Programs identified competitive salaries as a crucial barrier to retaining staff that had been given assistance in obtaining a degree and attracting new staff (Hart & Shumacher, 2005). According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (2004), 27% of the 7,522 teachers that left Head Start in 2003 did so because they found a similar position in the field, with a higher compensation package. Data linking teacher turn over to reduced program quality is numerous (Love, Ryer &



Faddis, 1992; Whitebook, Howes, & Phillips, 1989; Whitebook, Phillips, & Howes, 1993). Without monies for salary parity with public school kindergarten teachers, programs will experience increased turnover as staff exit for higher paying positions. Furthermore, programs will struggle to fill those vacancies with qualified teachers if they are unable to offer appropriate wages.

Thus, programs will need additional funding to cover the cost of tuition, books, supplies, transportation and substitutes as they support staff who return to school. Furthermore, increased funding will be needed to adequately compensate teachers and allow programs to retain and recruit qualified staff in the future. CLASP estimates that an additional \$2.7 billion over six years will be needed to meet the requirements in the House bill, and approximately \$3.4 billion over six years would be needed for the Senate proposal (Hart & Shumacher, 2006). There is little to no indication that Congress will exhibit effective stewardship and include additional resources to help programs assist staff in meeting the educational qualifications of the reauthorization in progress. As individual staff and programs begin the planning process needed to advance teacher qualifications, we must also turn our attention to the higher education community and its ability to offer appropriate early childhood teacher education programs.

The Capacity of Early Childhood Teacher Preparation Programs

Given the emphasis on increasing teacher qualifications, responsible policy makers should also investigate the ability of the higher education community to meet the demands of Head Start teachers attempting to further their education. Discussions of the capacity of higher education institutions involve two interrelated factors: content of the curriculum & capacity to provide degrees (available resources including faculty and structural characteristics).

Little research attention has been given to what is critical in designing a successful system of early childhood teacher preparation (Lobman, Ryan, & McLaughlin, 2005). Many researchers argue that presently, we are quite limited in our understanding of what is needed to prepare diverse groups of early childhood professionals to work effectively with young children of diverse learning, cultural and linguistic backgrounds (Ackerman, 2005; Karp, 2006). Data indicate gaps in many teacher preparation programs' ability to provide students with course content critical to successful early childhood classrooms (Early & Winton, 2001). There is substantial variability in the coursework addressing children with disabilities, children from diverse racial/ethnic backgrounds or children with limited English proficiency. This variability is also seen in the actual exposure to infant/toddler content and experience working in preschool settings. This variation makes it difficult to operationalize exactly what an early childhood education degree is. It also calls into question the ability of some universities to ensure that staff graduating with early childhood education degrees do, in fact, have the knowledge base, skills and experience that is critical to being successful early childhood education teachers.



There is also cause for concern about student access to early childhood teacher preparation programs and the faculty within those programs (Lobman, Ryan, & McLaughlin, 2006; Early & Winton, 2001). Early childhood education programs are difficult to find as they are housed in a variety of departments (e.g. home economics, family studies, child development) and possess a multitude of names. Limited number of institutions offer Bachelor's degrees and there are questions related to articulation of both the CDA credential and course work from A.A. degrees. Thus, teachers seeking to increase their qualifications are often geographically far from programs and may not be given credit for existing qualifications or experience.

Research also uncovers issues related to student's access to faculty within early childhood education programs. Research points to intensive, personal interaction between qualified faculty and non-traditional learners as an important predictor of student success. These kinds of relationships are more likely to be established with full-time, tenured faculty. On the whole, departments that house early childhood education faculty employ a disproportionate amount of part-time or adjunct faculty in comparison to other programs. The ratio of students to full time faculty in early childhood education programs is 61:1 compared to 39:1 in higher education in general (Lobman, Ryan & McLaughlin, 2006). Due to the part-time nature of their work, adjunct faculty themselves may be less familiar with strategies needed to successfully navigate individual college campuses. Without effective mentors, non-traditional students often feel disconnected from their more traditional peers and struggle with meeting course requirements.

Descriptive data on ECE faculty also raise questions about their qualifications. National studies found that only 53% of ECE faculty had degrees in ECE or related fields and only 64% had direct experience working with 3 or 4 year olds. Thus, students moving from 2 to 4 year degrees may be faced with the situation where they have more direct experience working in applicable early childhood settings than the faculty teaching their courses. In addition, studies indicate a lack of diversity among ECE faculty with the majority of faculty being white. Universities find it difficult to attract and retain ethnically and linguistically diverse faculty who are able to work with diverse learners with diverse cultural and linguistic needs. Non-traditional learners will struggle to form important relationships with faculty who ethnically and professionally, look very different from themselves. Faculty without direct cultural knowledge and professional experience will struggle to provide relevant and critical guidance to students on how to effectively work with diverse infants, toddlers, preschoolers and their families.

Consequently, as substantial numbers of Head Start teachers seek Bachelor's degrees they most likely will experience difficulties accessing early childhood teacher preparation programs. Once enrolled in an appropriate program, they will face additional barriers to accessing knowledgeable early childhood education faculty. These non-traditional students will join with increased numbers of more traditional ECE students to



further strain our existing system of early childhood teacher preparation. The current research indicates that it is unknown whether or not the higher education community is prepared to respond to future demands for qualified early childhood teachers.

Conclusions

Thus, Head Start programs in the state of Pennsylvania and across the country stand at a crossroads as they anticipate new requirements for teacher qualifications. We currently lack clear evidence that speaks to gains achieved in quality by moving early childhood teachers from A.A to B.A degrees. Coupled with the feasibility issues discussed above, Congress' attempt to increase Head Start classroom quality by increasing teacher qualifications is a simplistic, if not short-sited plan. Though the idea that teachers with more education provide better classroom environments for children makes intuitive sense, the current research speaks to the complexities of the related issues.

It is now, more than ever, important for the Pennsylvania Head Start community to weigh in on the growing debate surrounding teacher qualifications and quality in early care and education programs. As the Congress is poised to change regulations concerning the qualifications of teachers, we must raise specific questions about the impact of these regulations on the comprehensive services that we provide to our most economically at risk children and families. Issues related to the tractability of this proposal must be addressed before it becomes regulation. More specifically, the congress must consider the feasibility of these requirements given the current system of early childhood teacher preparation across the country. Consideration must be paid first to the barriers to fulfilling degree requirements faced by the current teaching staff and the programs that they work for. Finally, a systemic approach needs to be taken to ascertain the current capacity of each state's teacher preparation programs to offer necessary coursework and provide necessary supports to both traditional and non-traditional students. Following are a list of recommendations given all of the issues discussed throughout this paper.

- Establish an A.A. degree in early childhood education or related fields as a minimum qualification of all Head Start teachers.
- Encourage teachers to continue professional development beyond the A.A. level in a manner that is sensitive to the unique barriers faced by individual staff given the program they work in and their access to early childhood teacher preparation programs.
- Continue research efforts to clarify the relationship between classroom quality and teacher degree, experience and on-going professional development.
- Dedicated funding for scholarships, release time, mentoring & substitutes for teachers seeking higher education



- Develop alternate pathways for those with extensive experience or non-early childhood degrees
- Develop loan forgiveness programs for Head Start teachers and assistant teachers who stay in Head Start classroom after furthering their education.
- Commit additional funds to establish salary parity with public school kindergarten teachers

Without proper planning that provides necessary funding and establishes realistic time frames to ensure that all early care and education professionals, regardless of background and previous education level, have access to quality teacher preparation programs, Congress' attempts to positively impact quality in Head Start classrooms will at best, fall short, and at worst, actually decrease quality.



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Appendix A: Head Start Program Performance Standards Related to Staff Training and Professional Development

1301.31(a)

Description of methods for providing staff and volunteers with opportunities for training, development, and advancement.

1304.52 (k) (1)-(3)

- (1) Provide an orientation to all new staff, consultants & volunteers that includes at minimum, the goals and underlying philosophy of Early Head Start and/or Head Start and the ways in which they are implemented by the program.
- (2) establish and implement a structured approach to staff training and development, attaching academic credit whenever possible. This system should be designed to help build relationships among staff and to assist staff in acquiring or increasing the knowledge and skills needed to fulfill their job responsibilities, in accordance with the requirements of 45 CRF 1306.23
- (3) At minimum, the system must include ongoing opportunities for staff to acquire the knowledge and skills necessary to implement the content of the Head Start Program performance Standards. This program must also include:
 - (i) methods for identifying and reporting child abuse and neglect that comply with applicable State and local laws using, so far as possible, a helpful rather than a punitive attitude toward abusing or neglecting parents and other caretakers; and
 - (ii) methods for planning for successful child and family transitions to and from the Early Head Start or Head Start program.

1306.23

- (a) must provide pre-service training and in-service training opportunities to program staff and volunteers to assist them in acquiring or increasing the knowledge and skills they need to fulfill their job responsibilities. This training must be directed toward improving the ability of staff and volunteers to deliver services required by the Head Start regulations and policies.
- (b) Must provide staff with information and training about the underlying philosophy and goals of Head Start and the program options being implemented.



1304.52 (i) Staff Performance Appraisals

Programs must, at minimum, perform annual performance reviews of each Early Head Start and Head Start staff member and use the results of these reviews to identify staff training and professional development needs, modify staff performance agreements, as necessary, and assist each staff member in improving his or her skills and professional competencies.

1304.41 (c) (1) (iv)

Initiating joint transition-related training for Early Head Start or Head Start staff and school or other child development staff.